

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS

MINUTES OF THE EXECUTIVE MEETING

Tuesday 7 June 2011

Church House Conference Centre, Dean's Yard,
Westminster, London SW1P 3NZ



Present: Paul Carter (SEEC Chairman)
Paul Watkins (SEEC Secretary/Treasurer)
Andrew Bowles
Moira Gibson
Lynne Hack
Keith House
Barry Norton
David Robertson
James Swindlehurst

In Attendance: Chris Williams, Chairman of the LACE Group
Heather Bolton, Head of Communications & Public Affairs, SEEC
Nick Woolfenden, Head of Policy Co-ordination, SEEC
Hayley Austin, Office Co-ordinator, SEEC
Roy Millard, SESPM
Ian Coates, BIS Local
Pam Alexander, SEEDA
Kathy Slack, SEEDA
Helen Boulden, SESL

1. **Apologies, Declarations of Substitutes and Declarations of Interest**

- 1.1 Apologies were received from Mike Appleyard, Mary Ballin, Myles Cullen, Gordon Keymer, Andrew Povey, Cec Tallack and Ken Thornber.
- 1.2 The Chairman suggested that in future SEEC should bring forward the date of its AGM so it follows more closely after the May local government elections.
- 1.3 Heather Bolton updated members on the outcome of May's local elections and explained Member authorities were in the process of letting the secretariat know about any changes in their SEEC nominations.

2. **Minutes of SEEC Executive on 18 February 2011 and Matters Arising Not Elsewhere on the Agenda**

- 2.1 The minutes of the previous Executive were agreed as a true and accurate record.

3. **SEEDA update on transition to closure. Pam Alexander and Kathy Slack (SEEDA)**

- 3.1 Pam explained that this would be her last appearance at SEEC meetings as she is leaving SEEDA on 5 July, with Oona Muirhead then becoming Chief Executive. SEEDA would close by April 2012 with just a few people staying on to do accounts until July 2012. Kathy Slack gave more detail about what would be happening to key functions going forward; a handout providing further information is available at <http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/upload/files/SEECMeetingPresentationHandouts7June2011.pdf> Members were also offered the opportunity to attend a SEEDA workshop on changes to the economic development landscape on 30 June.

3.2 Paul Carter thanked Pam and Kathy for their work at SEEDA. He also emphasised the importance of maintaining intelligence on the state of the economy. Nick Woolfenden explained as well as SEEC's own work highlighting key economic information as part of the new Data Dashboard, SEEC would engage with BIS Local to understand what economic information it can share with SEEC. SEEC would also be receiving SEEDA's archive of historic economic intelligence and making it publicly available.

4. BIS Local: An introduction to role & remit. Ian Coates, BIS South Central & West (verbal)

4.1 Ian Coates explained with the closure of GOSE and RDAs, BIS ministers have set up BIS Local to help them engage with local partners and gather local feedback and intelligence.

4.2 Six BIS Local teams have been set up across England. Ian leads the South Central & West team; the London & East team and the East Midlands team also cover other parts of the SEEC area. With only 8-10 people in each team they are much smaller than the previous structures and do not have any programme budgets.

4.3 BIS regards Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) as key local vehicles to enable economic growth. It will also be engaging with other partners and local government in areas without LEPs. BIS Local will expect to have a core level of engagement with all local authorities, but beyond this it will be up to local partners to determine what further engagement is beneficial. Ian also explained DCLG is setting up its own arrangements for local engagement through directors.

4.4 In discussion members welcomed the removal of unnecessary regional bureaucracy, but highlighted concerns about whether BIS Local would have capacity to undertake all that was expected of it and the seeming proliferation of new arrangements by different departments. Members also expressed their keenness to ensure the South East benefitted from future Regional Growth Fund allocations and other economic instruments and asked that BIS Local help emphasise the needs of the South East to ministers.

ACTION 1: Ian Coates to be invited to present on BIS Local at SEEC's AGM in July; SEEC will consider writing to ministers in support of reducing unnecessary regional bureaucracy but raising concerns about the proliferation of new departmental arrangements.

5. Political balance on SEEC Executive following May elections

5.1 Heather Bolton explained that the seats on the Executive are calculated according to percentage of the vote but excluding parties that have less than 5% of total councillors. There is no change in the allocation of Executive seats following May's elections, with thirteen seats for the Conservatives, four for the Liberal Democrats and two for Labour. These seats will be nominated at the AGM in July.

6. Localism Bill: Questionnaire results and SEEC priorities

6.1 Nick Woolfenden explained that the Localism Bill completed its Commons stage during May and now moves into the Lords for further debate. SEEC members discussed key issues at a special workshop in May, highlighting continued concerns about the degree of central control, increased burdens and bureaucracy. Member responses to SEEC's questionnaire had helped inform debate.

- 6.2 Members discussed the draft briefing prepared following the workshop – the final version would be shared with members of the Lords to highlight SEEC’s key issues and inform their discussions. They agreed to emphasise support for the principle of localism and specific proposals in the Bill, including the power of competence, but to express concerns about possible unintended consequences (particularly increased burdens and bureaucracy) arising from provisions such as referendums and neighbourhood planning.

ACTION 2: Briefing to be refined in light of member comments and then circulated to members of the Lords.

7. SEEC Fair Funding report: Stage one report and next steps

- 7.1 Heather explained the Stage 1 report commissioned from Local Government Futures has provided evidence that the current local government grant formula is complex and opaque and the South East is doing badly compared to national averages.
- 7.2 Heather asked for members’ input on the Stage 2 research which would examine possible options for improving the system. The Chairman emphasised the importance of this in informing the Government’s work on changes to the system taking place this year. Heather outlined the suggestions in the report regarding localisation of business rates, equalisation, incentivisation and damping. She also suggested inviting the LGF consultant to present a draft report at the AGM in July.

ACTION 3: Invite LGF to AGM to stimulate further member discussion to inform Stage 2 of the research.

8. Collective working on strategic transport: Results of SEEC commissioned review

- 8.1 Heather explained that the Department for Transport (DfT) had expressed interest in local authorities’ collective views on strategic transport issues. As a result SEEC’s Executive had agreed to undertake work to examine local authority interest in this and how they might want to get involved.
- 8.2 SEEC commissioned an independent consultant to produce a report and following wide-ranging dialogue with local authority members and officers there was a consensus that there would be value in establishing a very light touch approach. There was also a strong message that members did not want to recreate the Regional Transport Board and did not want to prioritise schemes on behalf of the DfT or duplicate individual local authorities’ own relationships with DfT.
- 8.3 The consultant’s recommendation for SEEC is an informal working arrangement with light touch terms of reference. The report mentioned a role for a transport spokesperson but it is felt it would be more appropriate to have a political “convenor” to try and gain consensus from other members across the South East about areas they might want to take forward. Members also noted input from Andrew Povey regarding SESL which was circulated in his absence.
- 8.4 Following discussion members agreed that the political “convenor” model with officer support would be the right way forward – this post would be nominated at the SEEC AGM in July.

ACTION 4: SEEC secretariat to take this forward once convenor is nominated.

9. Migration update – latest data, migrant labour levels & business plan 2011-12

- 9.1 Roy Millard explained that overall migration figures remained stable over the last six months.
- 9.2 New research has been conducted with SEEDA to understand the scale of non-EU migrant labour in the LEP areas of the South East and skills gaps that may arise from the new cap on non-EU workers.
- 9.3 As the reduction in migrant labour from outside the EU starts to impact, this research will help Local Enterprise Partnerships, colleges and training providers to identify where the shortages are in their areas.
- 9.4 Members discussed the importance of also understanding the dependency on EU migrant workers, particularly given high levels of youth unemployment, and agreed that, through the Migration Partnership, Roy should be asked to commission this additional information.

ACTION 5: Members recommended Roy to do a piece of work to produce a regional picture of the impact of EU based migration – this was duly agreed by the Chair of the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM).

10. Verbal updates on SEEC activities

a) Membership for 2011-12

- 10.1 Heather explained a number of councils are on notice to resign from SEEC. The Chairman would be writing to them explaining the benefits of SEEC membership and encouraging them to remain members. Chris Williams reported that members of the Local Authority Chief Executives group (LACE) had recently expressed positive views on SEEC's impact and benefits of membership.

b) SEEC relationship with LGA: Feedback from meeting with LGA leadership

- 10.2 The Chairman gave feedback from his meeting with Margaret Eaton at the LGA. The LGA is keen to listen to local views to inform its views and work. The impending appointment of a new LGA Chairman and major restructuring also provide opportunities to improve working relationships.

c) Europe and data dashboard task & finish groups

- 10.3 Heather reminded members that the two member task groups would be reporting recommendations at the forthcoming AGM in July. This will include proposals for a SEEC Data Dashboard and how SEEC should best provide information on European funding opportunities.

11. Confirmed forward meeting dates:

- 11.1 Forward meeting dates for 2011 SEEC meetings were noted.
- SEEC AGM and All-Member meeting – 13 July 2011 at Church House Conference Centre, Westminster, London
 - Executive Committee meeting – 30 September 2011 at The Institute of Materials, Minerals & Mining, 1 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5DB
 - SEEC All-Member meeting – 8 November 2011 at The Royal Horticultural Halls & Conference Centre, 80 Vincent Square, London, SW1P 2PE
 - Executive Committee meeting – 9 December 2011 at The Institute of Materials, Minerals & Mining, 1 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5DB

12. Any other business

12.1 Paul Carter advised members that he had been in talks with Andrew Povey about establishing a closer working relationship between SEEC and SESL. He is attending a SESL meeting next week in which he hopes this will be discussed further.

12.2 There being no further business, the meeting closed at 13.10.